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ABSTRACT

A study assessed the ability of 20 eleventh grade students to recognize particular stylistic features when reading and then to use such features in their writing. Half the subjects were given a model paragraph from an Edgar Allen Poe story, without having the story identified for them, while the other half received only a verbal summary of the story, with the author and genre identified. All students were given a written summary of the paragraphs that followed the model paragraph. These summary paragraphs had been modified from the original in four characteristics (the long sentences in the original were shortened, the tense was changed, all subordination was removed, and the number of adjectival phrases was reduced). The students who had read the model paragraph were instructed to rewrite the summary paragraphs so that they would seem to belong with the model text. The other students who did not see the text were instructed to rewrite the summaries to create a "horrifying" story. All students were given six phrases taken from the original Poe paragraphs that they were supposed to work into their compositions. Between the two groups there was no significant difference in the ability to create a horrifying story. There were also no significant differences between the groups in their use of three of the four modified characteristics: length of sentence, and use of subordination and adjectival phrases. Thus, except for tense, a model text did not help the students to write in the horror genre. (HTH)

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An Investigation of the Awareness
and Use of Style in Adolescents'
Reading and Writing *

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Objective

This study assesses the ability of high school students to recognize particular stylistic features when reading and then to use this knowledge when writing.

Perspective

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The development of a sensitivity to style through reading can aid students in becoming aware of their own writing habits and style. The present study, one of a series of studies on the nature of the relationship between reading and writing conducted by the Toronto Writing Research Group, is based on the findings of a previous study (Church & Bereiter, 1983) in which grade 12 students' sensitivity to style was assessed by means of thinking aloud while reading a model text and then writing in the style of the text. Although their attention to style varied as did their ability to imitate it successfully in their compositions, all of the students attended only to diction - use of particular words and short descriptive phrases - in both their reading and writing, and ignored characteristics such as length of sentence and syntactic structure. It seemed that they focussed on diction because for them this was the most obvious way to capture the "flavour" of the style. In this study we decided to increase the saliency of the more structural characteristics of style, which are also important for developing a personal style, in order to see if this would increase students' attention to these features.

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* paper presented at the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, La., April 1984.

Method

Twenty grade 11 students were chosen at random from two English classes in a middle to upper middle class urban high school. One half were given the model text without having the story identified for them, while the other half received a verbal summary of the story, and had the author and genre of the story identified for them. The text was taken from an Edgar Allan Poe short story; the students were somewhat familiar with Poe's distinctive style because they had studied some of his short stories the year before.

The students were then given a written summary of the paragraphs which followed immediately after the model paragraph. These summary paragraphs had been modified so that they differed from the original story by four characteristics: the long sentences in the original were short in the summary, the past tense in Poe had been changed to present tense, all the subordination in Poe had been removed in the summary, and the heavy reliance on adjectival phrases in the original had been replaced with few adjectival phrases.

The students who had read the text were instructed to rewrite the summary paragraph so that someone reading their composition would think that it "belonged with" the model text. The other students who did not see the text were instructed to rewrite the summary so that they created a "really horrifying" story. All the students were given six phrases taken from the Poe paragraphs which they were to

work into their compositions. In this way we hoped to decrease even further the tendency to rely on diction.

The students were instructed in thinking aloud while reading and writing before they began, and thought aloud both while reading and writing in order that a picture of the whole reading-writing process could be obtained.

Results

Analysis of the Compositions: The compositions were analyzed both holistically, for their horrifying effect, and analytically, for the students' successful use of the four structural characteristics. A Primary Trait Scoring Scale (Lloyd-Jones, 1977) was used for the holistic evaluation; the important features of a horror story were identified through an analysis of Poe's, and others', horror stories. They were: the creation of a suspenseful situation through building up to and hinting at the climax; a dramatic and terrifying climax; use of horrifying and elaborate descriptive language. A scale was constructed which ranged from 8 for stories which conveyed a strong sense of horror to 1 for those which were mundane, plodding stories with no sense of horror.

None of the students were outstandingly successful at writing their horror stories. The mean score for all the students was 3.8; this meant that the students had generally incorporated only one feature into their writing, the appropriate descriptive language. The range of scores was from 1.5, stories in which no feeling of horror was communicated to the reader, to 6.0 where a horrifying climax

was included, but there was no suspense.

Between the two groups there was no significant difference in their ability to create a horrifying story, a mean of 3.75 for the group who saw the text and one of 4.0 for those who did not. There were also no significant differences between the groups in their use of three of the four characteristics: length of sentence, use of subordination and adjectival phrases.. However, the students who had seen the text rewrote their compositions into past tense significantly more at the .05 level than did the other group. Thus, except for tense, a model text did not help the students to write in that genre.

In order to investigate the relationship between the primary trait rating of horrifyingness and the four text characteristics, a principal components analysis was done of the five variables. Two factors were extracted, accounting for 80% of the variance. An oblimin rotation yielded essentially uncorrelated factors ($r=.09$). One factor was primarily identified by length, adjectival phrases, and subordination; the other factor was identified primarily by tense. Variance of the "horrifyingness" rating was approximately equally divided between the two factors (loadings of .54 and .56 respectively). This analysis was interpreted as confirming that the specific text variables were related to the primary trait rating of "horrifyingness," with an additional factor that reflected the effect of viewing the original text, which influenced use of tense but none of the other variables.

The other analysis of the compositions was an evaluation of

what the students added of their own when rewriting the summary paragraph. In this way we could see what the students attempted to do even if, in the end, they were not successful. The additions were categorized as either word, phrase, or sentence, as either "filling out" descriptions and actions or adding in new events, and whether the ending of the summary paragraph which was very abrupt ("the courtiers then died") was modified. Six out of the twenty students simply combined the summary paragraph with the six phrases without adding more than 3 or 4 words of their own, for example, "crimson carpet" instead of "carpet." There was a difference between the two groups in what they added to their compositions: those who did not see the text added more than did the students who saw the text. Seven out of ten of them modified the ending, either elaborating the final sentence or adding another sentence, while only three of the "text" group did this. Six of the "nontext" group added one or more sentences, while only three "text" students did. Both groups of students tended to embellish the story rather than modify the plot line. However, the more the students added of their own, the more they altered the plot. Again, it was the students who did not see the model text who were more apt to do this: seven of them incorporated new events in contrast to four in the other group. It seems, therefore, that giving students a model text not only does not help them but appears to hinder them, that it is easier to write a horrifying story without a model.

Analysis of Reading and Writing Protocols

The protocols were examined for three reasons: whether the students attended to style when they wrote, what kinds of strategies the students used when reading and writing, and how the preceding two related to writing performance. Although all the students were concerned primarily with the content of the story when they read, the students who were given the model text commented more frequently on style than did the others, a mean of 3.1 comments compared to 1.1 comments. This suggests that they students were attempting to learn from the text but were unable to use this knowledge when writing. We can see this when we compare what the students noticed when they read to what they used in their writing. For example: with tense, the only characteristic that differentiated the two groups' writing performance, four of the students commented on it when reading. Two of these consistently rewrote the paragraph into past tense, but the other two did not. Because the summary paragraph was in present tense and the six phrases were in past tense this factor should have been particularly striking. For, if the students did not change the tense, they ended up with an ungrammatical mixture of present and past tenses as in one student's composition: "Maddened by the cowardice of his courtiers, he held the dagger aloft as he runs after the intruder." Thus, it seems that the students did not have the strategies to use the model text effectively. One third of the students never referred back to the text after they finished reading, although this would seem to

be crucial in being able to write in a particular style.

The differences in strategy appeared to be within groups rather than between them. The criterion used for a successful strategy for those who were given the text was that they referred to it when writing. Three of the students referred back to the text six or more times; they were also three of the four students who were most successful at creating a horriying effect. They spent more than the average amount of time planning, and revised and evaluated their writing more than most of the others. The other factor which differentiated them was that they composed aloud before they wrote rather than simply writing without planning. The greater than average amount of planning and composing, evaluating and revising, also characterized the students in the other group who were most successful at writing their compositions. It seems, therefore, that some students had developed strategies that helped them create horrifying stories whether they were given a text or not.

Educational Implications

The evidence from this study shows that simply being given a model text of a horror story does not help students to write in that genre. This suggests that we will have to provide instruction if we want students to learn about style from reading. There are indications in this study, and in our earlier study, that there are particular strategies which can help students. One promising finding from this study is that model texts may increase attention to style. This awareness of style combined with the strategies which the more successful students used may facilitate students' ability to learn about their writing from reading.

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